SPECIAL ISSUE COMMENTARY

MULTILATERAL ONLINE EXCHANGES FOR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE LEARNING

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This special issue of *Language Learning & Technology* gathers five studies that deal with a recent development in CALL: multilateral online exchanges for learning language and culture. Multilateral exchanges reflect the changing reality of language learning in a globalized world where prolonged and intensive contact with one additional culture has given way to more fleeting encounters with multiple cultures, mediated by Web-based communication tools.

In the case of four of this special issue's articles, multilateral exchanges bring together groups of participants from two different institutions and countries. In recent years efforts have been made to expand the bilateral format to accommodate a multiplicity of partners and a more pluralistic approach to intercultural learning (see Hauck, 2007; Hauck & Lewis, 2007; Hauck & Youngs, 2008). A drawback for bilateral partnerships is an inherent risk that participants will see themselves and their partners as "representatives" of a given culture. In a multilateral exchange, however, learners' relationships with their own and other languages and cultures are more nuanced. With appropriate task design, their role is no longer to act solely as a "guide" to their own culture, but also to mediate between other cultures. In this special issue just such a four-way intercultural exchange, the *LITERALIA* Project, is examined by Stickler and Emke. This shift away from traditional bilateral online intercultural exchanges is, moreover, tied to the fact that fewer and fewer major societies are culturally homogeneous. In a diverse world, contemporary experience of culture is increasingly tribal (in the postmodern sense of the term) rather than national (see Maffesoli, 1988). Consequently, participants no longer fit neatly into the traditional binary schema of bilateral telecollaborative exchanges. In this issue, for example, Diana Yang provides an account of a bilateral English language exchange between students from Taiwanese and Japanese institutions in which the cultural identities of the learners themselves are not quite as uniform as one might assume. One of the students Yang features due to her relativistic attitude to shared online space is Stacy. Stacy's approach to linguistic and cultural exchange is coloured by the experience of having spent part of her life in the US. Likewise, one of the students from Yang's Japanese partner university whose World Athletes blog engages the interest of several Taiwanese partners is Jamal, a Malaysian fan of both soccer and basketball. Such intercultural affinities and identities are ever more frequent in today's world outdating notions of rigid bilateralism.

Roles for Teachers

In online learning exchanges roles for teachers differ from those in traditional classrooms. In the initial stages of a project the teacher is responsible for preparing learners for the challenges to come; designing tasks which will enable them to engage productively with members of another culture; selecting the right tools for the project; setting basic rules; establishing a clear timeframe and providing the space necessary for learners to reflect periodically (see Müller-Hartmann, 2007). Once a project has started, the teacher's role shifts. Rather than being responsible for imparting knowledge (which in some cases she may not possess), her task is to scaffold the construction by learners of shared knowledge "because the point is not to provide the right answer or to say which group members are right, but to perform a minimal pedagogical intervention…in order to redirect the group work in a productive direction or to monitor which members are left out of the interaction" (Dillenbourg, 1999, p. 8). Especially in Web-based collaborative exchanges for intercultural learning "the teacher cannot be the voice of authority. The

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teacher's role is … not to 'teach culture' in the traditional sense but to help students bring patterns to light and gradually put together the culture puzzle—in other words, to teach the students to ask the right questions themselves and to facilitate the experience of self-learning" (Furstenberg, 2010, pp. 330-331). In short, the aim of a telecollaborative exchange is to create a virtual learning community. In this "the facilitator plays a critical role in modeling social presence and identity for students. The facilitator can set the tone for the community and aid the development of trust and social bonds among learners" (Augar, Raitman, Lanham, & Zhou, 2006, p. 79). As is reflected in the special issue articles, task design and e-facilitation are particularly challenging in a telecollaborative setting.

Roles for Learners

What are roles for learners in such exchanges? Learners' roles may include individual tasks (preparation, diaries, personal logs, etc.), but the collective work, which is the main goal of collaboration, is also dependent on the individual who has a prominent role to play in the formation, coordination, development and adaptation of the group (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000). It should be noted that the collaborative group can be a fragile entity. "Group participation can involve risks and thus requires trust between participants" (Kling & Courtright, 2004, p. 102). As well as readiness to take risks, learners' other contributions are vital. Depending on their specific areas of expertise, they may be mentors or apprentices and are often simultaneously both (Riel & Polin, 2004). Within a socio-cultural framework, they will ideally participate as co-designers of an exchange and of its constituent tasks (Schwen & Hara, 2004). Perhaps the principal transformation for which they must be prepared is from consuming knowledge to constructing knowledge. In intercultural exchanges "the use of technology…generates a new methodology, where students themselves, by virtue of being involved in a dynamic, interactive process with their foreign peers, gradually construct their knowledge and understanding of the other culture" (Furstenberg, 2010, p. 331). For the learners, collaborative processes and outcomes eventually become their motivation and they willingly support the online learning situation as planned and modified—often with learner input—by task designers. It is important to note, however, that the backbone of the collaboration is not the assembly of pieces (e.g., software, hardware, exercises, learners, tutors), but the process and result of a shared collaborative goal (Augar, Raitman, Lanham, & Zhou, 2006, p. 81). This is a particular challenge to designers of telecollaborative exchanges and, through the examination of students' posts and reflections, the focus of this special issue's authors.

Roles for Technology

Telecollaborations are, by definition, mediated by technology. Communication tools are constantly evolving with a plethora currently available. Organizers of online exchanges combine asynchronous and synchronous media, text, audio, or video in monomodal or multimodal platforms (see Chanier & Vetter, 2006). Increasingly the environments that are developed for educational purposes are synchronous multimodal audiographic conferencing systems, combining an audio-conference, text chat, shared word processor, and white board, and offering multiple "virtual classrooms" (see Ciekanski & Chanier, 2008; Lamy & Hampel, 2007). The integration of a range of communicative and collaborative task-oriented modalities within a single environment makes possible the more or less simultaneous performance of a range of tasks which can be immensely supportive of joint language production. At the same time, social networking and file-sharing sites, as well as virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life) are increasingly being used for the construction and evaluation of joint content and the building of online communities in what Guth and Helm conceptualize as "telecollaboration 2.0" (see Coleman, Hampel, Hauck, & Stickler, in press; Guth & Helm, 2010). Moreover, Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Moodle (see Stickler and Emke, this issue) also offer a range of collaborative tools some of which may have specific benefits for those engaged in the sharing of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

The choice of technology, however, is not culturally neutral, nor are the spaces provided by online environments. Particular media are value-loaded. E-mail in particular may be experienced by younger participants as appropriate for vertical but not "peer-to-peer" communication (Thorne, 2006, pp. 20-21). In the studies included in this issue, technology choice appears somewhat conservative. Tools used are all or in part text-based. Three projects used only asynchronous communication. None used audio or video. Two made use of Learning Management Systems (WebCT and Moodle), two used Web 2.0 tools (blogs and wikis) and two combined synchronous and asynchronous media. Arguably, a range of media may be needed to support development of all four language macro-skills.

Language(s) Used

Given differing purposes and individual approaches to telecollaborations, there are also differing opinions about appropriate language use. For example, the *Cultura* project team argues that learners should use their first language in order to focus attention on cultural content and intercultural comparison (see Furstenberg, 2010; Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001). However, four of the projects reported in this issue adopt the principles of Tandem learning whereby the development of L2 communication skills accompanies that of intercultural competence. Tandem practitioners advocate equal use of first and target languages (Brammerts, 2003, p. 32). Moreover, online exchanges increasingly use English as a Lingua Franca for intercultural communication. Such is the case with Yang's study in this special issue.

The Special Issue Articles

The papers assembled for this special issue have two broadly different points of emphasis. Three of them focus on the mechanics of telecollaborative second language learning. The other two deal with different aspects of cultural learning in online exchanges.

The three papers that deal primarily with telecollaboration as a tool for second language development use different online modes for the exchanges they report and their data is differently compiled. Consequently, direct comparisons are not possible. Nonetheless, the papers offer some interesting parallels and points of divergence. The learning exchange described by Vinagre and Muñoz in *Computer-Mediated Corrective Feedback and Language Accuracy in Telecollaborative Exchanges* uses e-mail, a conventional and well-established asynchronous tool. For their project, Kabata and Edasawa, *Tandem Language Learning through a Cross-Cultural Keypal Project*, learners use a Web CT- based discussion board. Bower and Kawaguchi in *Negotiation of Meaning and Corrective Feedback in Japanese/English eTandem*, on the other hand, employ a complex combination of text chat (used in three intensive 30 minute sessions) and e-mail, the latter being reserved for the provision of follow-up feedback. This requires learners to convert text chat logs into word files in order to undertake error correction. These are then sent as e-mail attachments (see Appendix A, pp. 63-64).

Bower and Kawaguchi specify the rates of error correction in their project. In synchronous text chat the rates of error correction are extremely low. In English, 0.8% of errors are corrected and in Japanese only 4.1% (p. 54). The reasons for this appear to relate to the choice of online communication mode. As the authors point out, they are in line with previous studies of synchronous online exchanges (p. 61). In the asynchronous e-mail follow-up exchange, they are significantly higher, with 61.9% of errors being corrected in English and 65.8% in Japanese. Bower and Kawaguchi also indicate having chosen synchronous text chat for its increased potential for focus on form. Arguably, text chat does afford learners greater opportunity for noticing, processing, planning and producing language than face-to-face oral interaction (see Sauro, 2009, pp. 100-101). But this is equally, if not more so the case with asynchronous online discussion. As Bower and Kawaguchi emphasize, while nearly devoid of corrective feedback, students' synchronous text chat logs reveal high levels of negotiation of meaning (see also O'Rourke, 2005). This takes the form of clarification requests or confirmation checks, a significant proportion of which were triggered by comprehension difficulties rather than actual errors. Thus in

English, 6.6% of text chat negotiation was due to problems of communication, while only 0.6% was provoked by errors, with corresponding figures for Japanese 16.7% and 3.3% (p. 53). It seems likely that this kind of interaction is fostered by the relative rapidity of response offered by synchronous tools rather than by the time learners have to read and construct their posts.

All three papers discuss the main types of error made and corrected in these online exchanges. In overall terms, the raw numerical data suggest that grammatical errors are two or three times more likely to occur and to be corrected than lexical, or spelling (or typographical) errors. Morphological errors appear to be more frequent than syntactic ones. Vinagre and Muñoz cite concordance errors as being most prominent in their data (p. 78). Bower and Kawaguchi likewise identify the most prominent errors made by their learners as "subject-verb agreement, tense, articles and singular-plural problems in English and the use of inappropriate case-marking particles [and] problems of verb/adjective conjugation and connections in Japanese" (p. 49). Higher-level pragmatic, idiomatic, and discourse errors are identified only rarely and correction of them is equally infrequent.

Some of the errors made by learners and singled out for correction relate to the nature of the language being learned. Bower and Kawaguchi, for example, report a significant proportion of errors in Kanji among their Australian learners of Japanese. For Spanish learners of German, errors of word order and preposition use were high on the list of what was corrected (Vinagre and Muñoz, this issue, p. 78). Other types of errors identified and corrected appear to be determined by the modalities of the particular exchange. For example, Bower and Kawaguchi point to a series of studies of synchronous CMC exchanges where "lexical errors receive more corrective feedback than grammatical errors" (p. 62). In Kabata and Edasawa's asynchronous, meaning-focused exchange, though grammatical errors were the type most corrected by native speaker partners, learners themselves indicated that most of their actual learning was lexical and from other sources.

With regard to methods of correction, these three papers give some consideration to the different methods of error correction used in the exchanges they report. To some extent, these relate to the mode being used. In synchronous text chat, the learning partners studied by Bower and Kawaguchi employed recasts and negotiation (i.e., confirmation and clarification checks). In asynchronous e-mail feedback, however, the same learners made exclusive use of explicit negative feedback. Both Kabata and Edasawa and Vinagre and Muñoz analyze data drawn from student learning logs. This gives some indication of which methods of error correction were the most salient for learners since what is recorded are those corrections which have, by definition, been attended to. Their evidence suggests that online learners notice explicit error correction more readily than implicit error correction. Kabata and Edasawa point out, however, that once implicit or negotiated corrections were "noticed" by learners, they tended to incorporate them in their subsequent output (pp. 116-117). This appears to suggest that the effectiveness of error correction may be best judged not in terms of its implicitness or explicitness, but by the degree to which learners themselves are cognitively engaged and thereby recycle corrected items. In apparent corroboration of Kabata and Edasawa, Vinagre and Muñoz demonstrate through their research that, though less frequent, rectifications of errors by remediation are more than twice as likely to be incorporated by learners in their future production (p. 80). Whether this remains the case over time, is unclear (see Sauro, 2009).

While these three papers deal with relatively small samples, they do suggest that in order to develop both formal and semantic aspects of language, a combination of negative feedback and negotiation of meaning may be required. Achieving this implies incorporating both asynchronous and synchronous modes in online exchanges. Kabata and Edasawa suggest that "incidental learning" is (a) primarily lexical and (b) highly dependent on learners having achieved a level of L2 proficiency (p. 117). Consequently, there is strong need for error correction to be explicit, especially for formal language development by learners with relatively low levels of L2 proficiency. At the same time, partners in such exchanges need to be informed of and trained in techniques of remediation and/or negotiation.

Yang's article, *Learner Interpretations of Shared Space in Multilateral English Blogging*, reports a study of an online exchange between Japanese and Taiwanese learners of English. Using personal blogs, students were given the option of visiting whichever blogs they wanted and of leaving comments for the blog owners. In this way, learner-driven communication was examined and research data archived from blogs and interviews with the students. As Yang reports, "students in this multilateral English blogging project reported that the presence of pre-existing shared interests, mutual understanding, or shared personal experience serves as common ground for peer discussions" (p. 136). Communication online therefore takes place in a shared space in which students can choose which blogs to respond to based on commonality (e.g., a student would pick a blog to respond to because of shared interests and experiences). Interestingly, the blogs indicate that learners strove to make connections with the blog owners, accessing cultural information that was both perceived and actual in order to establish rapport with other students. In addition, focusing on the definition of affinity space which includes 'members' of a shared knowledge community by the use of symbols or abbreviations, Yang illustrated how her students used blogs to express affinity as well as for the development of a shared foreign language, thereby facilitating the building of social language networks.

In *LITERALIA*: *Towards Developing Intercultural Maturity Online*, Stickler and Emke explore adult learners' uses of combined online communication and actual live visits for intercultural learning as an extension of their ongoing formal or informal study of a foreign language. In order to examine learners' experiences, the authors employ a multiperspectival ethnographic approach and combine theories of adult learning with existing models of intercultural competence to generate a concept they refer to as intercultural maturity. Learning partners from the UK, Italy, Germany, and Poland took part in this EU-funded project. The study focuses on their changing attitudes to national cultures. But these were not the only cultural adjustments participants had to make. For many of these older learners, working online required a second, equally significant cultural adaptation. As the authors note, "Cultural information (*savoirs*) was gathered via the online tools", while "on a communication level learners engaged in the online culture practising multilateral communication. At the highest level of intercultural maturity learners had not just developed a critical intercultural awareness and reflective attitude but were also able to select the different online tools to best fit their communication intentions" (p. 157).

Future Directions

The success of future research on multilateral online exchanges requires first of all that more language educators assume the laborious but rewarding task of organizing, researching, and reporting on them. Such exchanges have a wide diversity of potential purposes, ranging from straightforward language practice, through the development of intercultural communicative competence, to the learning of specific skills, such as interpreting and multicultural teamwork. Each will require appropriate research methods. While experimentally derived quantitative data can provide illuminating insights into second language acquisition, less interventionist methodologies will be needed to trace the transformation of attitudes and behaviours that constitutes the growth of intercultural competence. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the two studies in this issue which deal with aspects of culture both draw on ethnographic models. Another non-interventionist alternative is offered by corpus-based methodologies, made all the more viable by the increasing ease with which it is possible to capture multimodal electronic corpora. Diachronic analysis of discussion threads, or in virtual environments the use of online space, will continue to provide evidence of change (see Audras & Chanier, 2008).

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